

Archaeology and Tourism in West Sumatra.

Paper prepared for presentation at the Second International Symposium on
Globalization and Local Culture: a Dialectic towards the New Indonesia
Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia, July 18-21, 2001

John N Miksic

Southeast Asian Studies Programme

National University of Singapore

Abstract:

West Sumatra has enjoyed a moderate degree of success in attracting tourists, both regional and international. West Sumatra's cultural heritage supplies some of its prime touristic assets, and local handicrafts have benefited to some extent from the tourist market. One of the province's less developed tourist assets consists of its archaeological resources. These are considerable, both in number and in quality, but they are not as intensively marketed as the natural and ethnographic assets of the province. The archaeological resources of West Sumatra consist of two main categories: pre-Islamic and Islamic. Each of these poses separate problems of marketing and interpretation. Perhaps one reason for the relative dearth of emphasis placed on the archaeological resources as tourist assets is the disparity between these two categories. A unified plan for developing archaeological resources for tourism can be proposed, which would create a link between the pre-Islamic and Islamic assets, thus strengthening their overall impact and economic viability. In order to create support for implementing such a plan, a cooperative relationship with the local population in the vicinity of the most important sites should be developed, which would bring sustainable benefits to all stakeholders. The broad outlines of such a plan will be suggested here. The example of Preah Khan in Angkor can be used as a model for such development.

Introduction.

Most of the primary tourist assets in the world are archaeological in nature: the Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal in India, and the ruins of Greece and Rome, for example. In Southeast Asia, perhaps the best-known point of touristic interest is Angkor Wat, which is now attracting large numbers of tourists again, only a few years after the country emerged from several decades of horror. Indonesia's nearest analogue to these is of course Borobudur. The point is that archaeological sites, especially those of ancient civilizations, are the most powerful single attractions which countries can exploit to increase proceeds from tourism.

The pros and cons of tourism development have been and will continue to be debated. Indonesian scholars themselves have been among those in the forefront of such discussions (see Wiendu ; *Lintas Budaya* no. 1, 1990-91, special issue entitled "Dilema Kepariwisataaan" for examples). This paper will proceed from the assumption that tourism is a part of economic change, and therefore both desirable and inevitable. The challenge lies in the search for the strategy which optimizes the positive effects and minimizes the deleterious effects of such change.

In Indonesia, cultural tourism has been most successfully pursued by Bali, and secondarily by central Java. West Sumatra lies on the second tier of tourism, along with South Sulawesi, where the main asset is Tana Toraja, and North Sumatra, with Lake Toba. West Sumatra has long had a special relationship with Singapore, although this connection is now largely a memory. During the middle years of the twentieth century, the West Sumatra highlands including Bukittinggi and Danau Maninjau were among the most popular destinations for Singaporeans going on their honeymoons. Although this practice is now largely in abeyance, the previous existence of a successful industry suggests that to revive an interest in the region among both other Southeast Asians and other potential visitors from further afield would not be a very difficult task.

The reasons for the drop-off in Singaporean tourists to West Sumatra have not been studied in detail, although the common reasons which one might initially suspect are all probably to some extent implicated: economic prosperity which enables Singaporeans to go further afield, negative publicity from recent political unrest in Indonesia, etc. The experience of Cambodia however indicates that such a decline is not irreversible.

One possible factor involved in the decrease in Singaporean and other visitors to highland West Sumatra may be that not all of West Sumatra's assets have been properly marketed. Presently West Sumatra mainly relies on its contemporary features: natural beauty, unusual and interesting cultural practices and performances and handicrafts. This means that one of tourism's proven asset categories, historical and archaeological sites, has been relatively underdeveloped. This paper will attempt to lay out some strategies by which these assets might be better exploited, and will end by suggesting how the revenue from this development could be used to better both the preservation of these sites and also the present economic situation of the population.

Archaeology and Tourism: some cautionary notes

It is true that archaeological sites are fragile entities. To call attention to sites which are not properly supervised and guarded may well mean that the sites will be rapidly degraded or even destroyed. Thus tourism development at these locations requires that prior planning be implemented, and proper safeguards installed before tourism begins. This is not without risk; it involves investment in security facilities and people before it is certain that income from such development will repay the outlay. It is therefore beneficial to implement such a program in stages, identifying sites with good potential, concentrating on a set of them first, and observing the benefits which accrue from such development. Where heritage and archaeological sites are concerned, it is often difficult to ascertain the extent to which they generate income, because such sites often bring in more indirect than direct funds. Most historic sites do not charge admission fees, but the investment in publicizing and protecting them is more than repaid by the indirect income experienced by providers of services (hotels, food sellers) and sellers of handicrafts. In order to evaluate the actual benefits obtained from archaeological tourism, it is therefore necessary to have some form of research project in which statistics are kept on the number of visitors who come to the sites, the amount of time they spend there, the kinds of expenditures they make (on lodging, food, souvenirs), and also the kind of additional expenditures they would make if further opportunities for spending were available.

Some studies have been performed on the impact of tourism on archaeological sites in Indonesia (see e.g. Tim Peneliti 1993). In general, it seems that most danger derives not from tourists, but from organized groups of antiquities thieves and smugglers. A significant portion of damage suffered from tourism activities is due more to improper supervision and lack of preliminary planning for tourist movements and access than to wear and tear due to the inevitable traffic of human feet and friction from contact between monuments and bags, hands, etc. Most negative effects of tourism on heritage sites can therefore be prevented by proper planning and guidance of visitors.

The second source of damage to sites is the improper development of the sites themselves by the developers: incautious location of signs, ancillary structures such as display booths, shelters for guards, etc. Too often the management of sites is turned over to private organizations whose main motivation is generation of profit. In cases where this is not true, improper restoration or reconstruction of ancient structures on the basis of the misguided assumption that tourists wish to see such sites recreated rather than in conditions which show their antiquity are often to blame. Close coordination between archaeologists and heritage site planners is an absolute necessity to ensure that proper archaeological values are preserved.

West Sumatran Case Study

Turning now to specific details of West Sumatra, it is possible to divide the potential assets of the province into three types, based on the time periods represented. West Sumatra possesses impressive monuments from the prehistoric era, some of which display considerable artistic merit. It does not hurt that these are situated in areas of great natural beauty. During the late phase of the Classical era of Indonesia, West Sumatra became the center of a kingdom which left significant traces in the form of sculpture and inscriptions. From the modern era, which archaeologists term the Islamic phase, numerous structures such as mosques and tombs exist.

Each of these asset types presents specific problems of interpretation and marketing. Of these, the Islamic assets are the most sensitive. It is also possible that the desire to maintain a pure Islamic society in this, one of Indonesia's most staunchly Muslim provinces, raises other concerns about the development of tourism. This latter

concern is a political rather than scholarly matter, so I will not comment upon it directly. I will however conclude this presentation by noting how development of archaeological assets can provide economic benefits to rural populations, and note that cultural pollution is not an inevitable concomitant of tourism. Niche marketing of heritage assets can target those tourists who are most likely to be respectful of other religions and traditions, fostering mutual understanding rather than tension.

Prehistoric Assets

It is often forgotten that Dubois, the discoverer of Java Man, first tried his luck in West Sumatra before shifting to Java where he achieved a remarkable success at Trinil, on the bank of the Solo River. Various important sites of the early prehistoric period, such as at Danau Gadang, Kerinci, where ancient bronzes have been found, suggest that many important finds remain to be uncovered in the province. Such finds are more suited to museum display, however.

Monumental sites which enable visitors to interact directly and personally with the remains, and are therefore suited for tourism development, are found mainly in the Lima Puluh Kota/Payakumbuh area. These are conventionally termed "megaliths", or *batu tegak* in Minangkabau. Several major complexes of these sites exist. Some, such as Kuto Lawe, Balubus, and Guguk Nanang, have been restored. At Guguk Nunang a very nice little museum was built, but on my last visit in 1999 it had been abandoned.

A more remote complex of sites with considerable potential for development lies in the valley of Mahat, where the Sinamar River, a tributary of the Batanghari, has its source. This beautiful area has been the site of several archaeological research projects (Miksic 1985, 1986, 1987), which have demonstrated that the use of these stones was part of a complex ritual system which probably lasted for a long period of time. Human burials were found in association with some of the sites in Mahat, but they have not yet been dated.

Development of these sites for a combination of heritage and adventure tourism would seem to present few problems. They are not generally seen as culturally sensitive. The main goal would be to generate support for further research on the archaeology of these sites.

Classic Sites

Remains of this period are associated mainly with the name of Adityavarman, a historical figure who established a kingdom in the Batusangkar/Tanah Datar/Pagarruyung area in the fourteenth century. His story is interesting in itself; he is one of the few figures from ancient West Sumatra whose name is known, and various details of his career from his origins in east Java to his establishment of a kingdom in the Minang highlands can be reconstructed, although not without a degree of uncertainty. He seems to have tried to impose a Javanese-style kingdom on the mainly egalitarian Minang society. He left his imprint on various sites which seem to derive from the previous cultural ethos, such as Kubu Rajo, where he probably had inscriptions carved on stone seats used in earlier village councils. Sites connected with his reign are mainly concentrated around Saruaso, though they extend all the way to Padang Roco and Sungai Dareh in the far southeast of the province, and even further into the east Sumatran lowlands.

Development of these sites would also seem to present few problems. The main considerations again consist of improving interpretation and access, and developing more knowledge about the sites themselves.

Islamic Sites

West Sumatra also contains numerous remains of early periods of Islamic penetration. These include such monuments as important mosques of distinctive style, early style tombstones, for example at Dusun Jirat, and grave complexes, such as that of Syeikh Burhanuddin at Ulakan. These sites are also of potential interest to visitors, but at this point sensitive points arise. The entire concept of Islamic tourism is still evolving. More Islamic countries, including even Saudi Arabia, have begun to devise means of allowing non-Muslims to view Islamic antiquities, partly in an effort to dispell misunderstandings between Muslims and non-Muslims. On the other hand, there are strong concerns that any introduction of tourism into Islamic sites will defile the religion and commercialize sites which should be free of monetary associations.

It is probable that means can be found to maintain a kind of tourist curtain between the areas accessible to tourists, and those which are off limits. In the past such curtains have been more covert than overt, but it may be time for specific explicit policies to be devised governing the nature of the visit and the view or "gaze" which tourists ought to be able to have of these assets. Muslim scholars have agreed that there is no concrete reason why visitors with proper motives should not be allowed to view such sites as graves and houses of worship, at least from the outside.

Developing Popular Support for Tourism

One of the most important assets which any area should be able to exploit is its own living population. This is a major proportion of any visitor's experience, and ensuring cordial interaction between hosts and guests is the only means to ensure that tourism fulfills its maximum potential to foster mutual understanding and peace. In order for this to happen, it is necessary that the hosts, specifically those who live in the areas visited by tourists, be made to feel that they benefit in both spiritual and material terms. Tourism has the potential to act as a channel for economic development for the lower socio-economic levels of society, providing employment for rural poor and women.

One of the ways in which benefit from tourism can be maximized, both for the hosts and for the tourist assets themselves, in this study the archaeological sites, is to create a link between the welfare of the people and of the sites in their midst. A good example of how this can be done has recently been inaugurated at Preah Khan, one of the main temple sites at Angkor, Cambodia. Here workers on the temple restoration have been assisted in setting up a small visitor center where refreshments and souvenirs, in the form of replicas and other items using motifs from ancient Khmer art, are sold. These objects are made by the families of the workers themselves. In this way the hosts are made to feel that they have a real stake in preserving the site, and expanding knowledge of and interest in the less dramatic aspects of ancient Khmer art such as sculptures.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to sketch the outline for studies leading to the development of more intensive archaeological tourism in West Sumatra. In such a way,

several parties would benefit: the present-day inhabitants of the region, the visitors, and the sites themselves. Several potential obstacles to such development exist, but there are examples from other areas which can be utilized to devise ways to overcome them.

References:

Miksic, J.H. Parallels between the upright stones of west Sumatra and those of Malacca and Negeri Sembilan." **Journal of the Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society** 58 (1) 1985 Pp. 71-80.

Miksic, J.N. "A valley of megaliths in West Sumatra: Mahat (Schnitger's Aoer Doeri) revisited." **Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society** 59 (1) 1986 Pp. 27-32.

Miksic, J.N. "From Seri Vijaya to Melaka: Batu Tagak in historical and cultural context." **Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society** 60 (2) 1987 Pp. 1-42.

Tim Peneliti **Dampak Pariwisata terhadap Situs dan Peninggalan Arkeologi di Bali**. Denpasar: Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Udayana, 1993

Wiendu Nuryanti (ed). **Tourism and Culture: Global Civilization in Change?** Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1996.

Wiendu Nuryanti. **Heritage, Tourism and Local Communities**. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1999.

